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Red Defector

A few weeks after he defected to the United States, Russian philosophy professor Yuri Alexeyevitch Aseyev did an about-face and decided to return to the Soviet Union.

The news accounts were brief, saying only that Aseyev had decided to return for personal reasons. They did not point out, as Newsweek subsequently revealed, that Aseyev underwent an ordeal at the hands of his American "hosts" which so demoralized and confused him that he jumped headfirst from a third-floor window, rupturing his spleen and cutting his scalp from ear to ear, then later attempted to throw himself on the tracks in front of an approaching Boston subway train.

Aseyev was upset by what he termed an "inquisition" at the hands of officials of the State Department, the Immigration Service, the FBI, and the CIA. But he was particularly upset because, in Newsweek's words, "the State Department dragged its feet about granting him political asylum."

THE STATE DEPARTMENT denies delaying Aseyev's request. Nevertheless, Newsweek insists that he was officially granted asylum only after his initial suicide attempt. His friends, the magazine said, linked the delay to the cultural exchange talks which were about to resume in Moscow, after having been postponed because of the arrest on spy charges of Yale Prof. Frederick Barghoorn.

In its frenzied effort to walk the extra mile with Russia, to convince Americans that the Soviets are evolving toward freedom, the State Department repeatedly has minimized Soviet duplicity and aggression — as, for example, the arrest of Professor Barghoorn, the halting of U.S. military convoys in Germany, and in the shooting down and imprisonment of U.S. fliers. In its delay over offering political asylum to Aseyev, State undoubtedly was worried about — and carefully weighing—the effect his defection would have on U.S.-Soviet relations. It would be difficult to convince Americans of Russia's peaceful intentions at the same time a defector was saying otherwise.

CPYRGHT

This attitude is not confined to the State Department. A year or so ago, when Washington officials and many U.S. economists were insisting that the Soviet Union's Gross National Product was growing at a much higher rate than our own, Prof. G. Warren Nutter, head of the economics department of the University of Virginia, demonstrated that these figures were inflated. A few months ago, the Central Intelligence Agency confirmed Nutter's thesis.

NEVERTHELESS, at the time Professor Nutter challenged the spurious statistics, he was decidedly unpopular. He said many scholars, journalists, and government officials told him "I was being irresponsible in saying some things even though true, because that would create the wrong attitudes and make people complacent . . ."

Nutter rejected the argument, saying he considered it a dangerous position. "It's what I call 'welfare scholarship'," he told U.S. News & World Report, "when a self-appointed intellectual aristocracy thinks it has the duty to protect the public from the consequences of thinking things through for itself. The public is viewed as foolish and ignorant."

In other words, Nutter's critics contended that it is less important for Americans to know the truth than for it to adopt attitudes a self-appointed elite wants them to hold . . . even though those attitudes are based on misinformation. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that this also was the thinking of the State Department in the tragic case involving Professor Aseyev.